



AVIAN INFLUENZA (BIRD FLU)

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is avian influenza (bird flu)?

Bird flu is an infection caused by avian (bird) flu viruses. There are many different flu viruses that occur naturally among birds. Wild birds worldwide carry the viruses in their intestines but may not get sick from them. However, bird flu is easily spread among birds and can make some domesticated birds – including chickens, ducks and turkeys – very sick and may even kill them.

Can people get the bird flu?

Bird flu viruses do not usually infect humans, but cases of human infection with bird flu viruses have occurred since 1997. The risk to humans for becoming ill with bird flu is generally low. However, during an outbreak of bird flu among poultry (domesticated chicken, ducks, turkeys), there may be a risk to people who have close contact with infected birds or surfaces that have been contaminated with excretions from infected birds.

What is the H5N1 virus we keep hearing about?

H5N1 is the type of bird flu occurring in countries in the world right now.

Has the H5N1 virus of concern been found in the United States?

No. Although other types of bird flu have occurred, there have been no cases of this type of H5N1 virus identified in the United States in either birds or humans. However, scientists expect that the virus eventually will spread worldwide.

What are the symptoms of bird flu in humans?

Symptoms of bird flu in humans have ranged from typical flu-like symptoms (fever, cough, sore throat and muscle aches) to eye infections, severe respiratory diseases (such as acute respiratory distress), and other severe and life-threatening complications. The symptoms of bird flu may depend on which virus caused the infection.

How is bird flu in humans treated?

Studies suggest that the prescription medicines (antivirals) approved for human flu viruses work in preventing bird flu in humans. However, flu viruses can become resistant to these drugs, so these medications may not always work.

Is there a vaccine to protect me from the bird flu?

There currently is no vaccine to protect humans against the H5N1 virus. However, vaccine development efforts are underway. Research on a vaccine to protect humans against the H5N1 virus began in April 2005. (Researchers are also working on a vaccine against H9N2, another bird flu subtype.)

We keep hearing that the bird flu could start a pandemic. What is pandemic flu?

In order for influenza “outbreaks” or epidemics to reach a pandemic status, it must be occurring worldwide, not just in a single country or continent.

A pandemic can start when three conditions have been met:

- A new influenza virus subtype emerges.
- It infects humans, causing serious illness.
- It spreads easily from person to person.

The H5N1 virus meets the first two conditions, but so far it has not been spread easily from person to person. If the third condition occurs, the virus could spread worldwide, causing an influenza pandemic.

The risk of pandemic influenza is serious. With continued cases of H5N1 in birds, the risk to humans will persist. Each additional human case gives the virus a chance to change. These changes could mean that the virus can spread from human to human more easily. The recent spread of the virus to poultry and wild birds in new areas further broadens opportunities for human cases to occur.

While neither the timing nor the severity of the next pandemic can be predicted, concern that a pandemic will occur has increased.

What can I do to protect myself and my family from avian flu or any kind of flu?

You can take simple steps to help prevent the spread of any type of influenza and other illnesses. Follow these simple steps:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Keep your distance from others if you’re sick.
- Stay home from work, school and errands when you are sick, and don’t send your children to day care or school if they are sick.
- Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing.
- Wash your hands often or use waterless hand sanitizers.

For more information, call the North Dakota Department of Health at 701.328.2378.

600 E. Boulevard Ave., Dept. 301, Bismarck, N.D. 58505-0200
Phone: 701.328.2372 Fax: 701.328.4727 E-mail: health@state.nd.us

Visit the health department website at www.ndhealth.gov.